DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 516 CS 012 626

AUTHOR Afflerbach, Peter; Moni, Karen
TITLE Improving the Usefulness and Effectiveness of Reading Assessment. Instructional Resource No. 33.
INSTITUTION National Reading Research Center, Athens, GA.; National Reading Research Center, College Park, MD.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 96
CONTRACT 117A20007
NOTE 31p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Classroom Communication; Evaluation Methods; Grade 6; Intermediate Grades; *Reading Achievement; Reading Research; *Student Evaluation; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

There is considerable interest in reading assessment and the influence that reading assessment can have on what is taught and learned in school. However, little is known about how teachers, administrators, parents, and students communicate and understand reading assessment information. Lacking this knowledge, educators do not know what kinds of reading assessment are useful to teachers and students. A study investigated the communication of reading assessment information between teachers and students in a metropolitan elementary school. Reading assessment information encountered in a sixth-grade classroom was the focus, as well as the experiences and issues that emerged in the yearlong investigation of how the teacher and a student communicated and understood reading assessment information. Findings suggest that successful communication of reading assessment information is never guaranteed, and that careful work must be done to create a context in which students understand what is intended. Contains nine references. (Author/RS)

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Improving the Usefulness and Effectiveness of Reading Assessment

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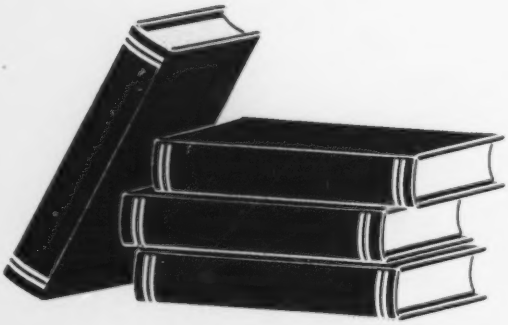

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NRRC Instructional Resource No. 33
National Reading Research Center Fall 1996

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National Reading Research Center

Improving the Usefulness and Effectiveness of Reading Assessment

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INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE NO. 33
Fall 1996

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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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Dr. Afflerbach has been a member of the Literacy Assessment Committee of the International Reading Association, and he currently serves on the Reading/Language Arts Advisory Panel of the New Standards Projects, the Content Area Experts Panel for Middle School for the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, and on the Board of Directors of the National Reading Conference. He was selected as a Lilly Foundation Fellow for the Excellence in Teaching Program at the University of Maryland, and was awarded a Ford Foundation Grant for innovation in undergraduate education when he taught at Emory University.

Karen Moni received an Honour Degree in English literature and the Diploma of Education at the University of Leeds, England. She then served as an English and drama teacher in an English high school. After moving to Australia she taught in an alternative education program for disaffected youth and school refusers in Brisbane, Queensland.

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National Reading Research Center
Universities of Georgia and Maryland
Instructional Resource No. 33
Fall 1996

Improving the Usefulness and Effectiveness of Reading Assessment

Abstract. *There is considerable interest in reading assessment and the influence that reading assessment can have on what is taught and learned in school. However, little is known about how teachers, administrators, parents, and students communicate and understand reading assessment information. Lacking this knowledge, we do not know what kinds of reading assessment are useful to teacher and students. We cannot determine how (and what kind of) reading assessment contributes to effective reading instruction and learning. The study we draw on in this instructional resource investigated the communication of reading assessment information between teachers and students in a metropolitan elementary school. We focus on the reading assessment information that we encountered in a sixth-grade classroom, and we describe the experiences and issues that emerged in our yearlong investigation of how the teacher and a student communicated and understood reading assessment information. Following the description of communications related to each type of reading assessment, we provide recommendations for best utilizing reading assessment information.*

Reading assessment is central to the maintenance and improvement of educational practice and learning (Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994). Assessment results provide diagnostic information that may lead to changes in instruction and learning in a classroom, school, district, state, or country (Johnston, 1992). Assessment is also used to hold students, teachers,

parents, and schools accountable, and assessment can measure students' minimum competencies as well as their maximum achievements. Reading assessment information may prove motivating for teachers and students as it provides feedback about the quality and accuracy of reading performance. In addition, reading assessment results may influence school funding decisions, and the endorsement or rejection of particular instructional programs. Despite much recent interest and research in reading assessment and the considerable influence that reading assessment can have on what is taught and learned in school, little is known about how teachers, administrators, parents, and students communicate and understand reading assessment information. Without this knowledge we do not know what kinds of reading assessment are useful to teachers and students. Furthermore, we are unable to determine how (and what kind of) reading assessment contributes to effective reading instruction and learning, and we are unable to judge the ultimate effect or influence of assessment on teaching, learning, and achievement.

This study investigated the communication of reading assessment information between teachers and students in a metropolitan elementary school. We examined the intended and interpreted meaning of reading assessment information including teachers' oral feedback to students during reading lessons, report cards, and a district-wide criterion referenced test. In this instructional resource, we will focus on the reading assessment information that we encountered

in the sixth-grade classroom of Karol; and we describe the manner in which William, a student in Karol's class, understood the information. We will describe the experiences and issues that emerged in our yearlong investigation of how Karol and William communicated and understood reading assessment information. Following the examination of each type of reading assessment, we will provide recommendations for school personnel that might help best utilize the information from specific assessment materials and practices, and that might inform the development and selection of reading assessments in elementary school.

Methodology

This study was conducted over the course of an academic year, from September to June. We used interpretive, phenomenological inquiry (Erickson, 1986) to construct an understanding of how people communicate reading assessment information, and how they assign meaning to both reading assessment information and reading assessment processes (Bogdan & Biklan, 1982; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The study was conducted in a public school in a large metropolitan district. Fern Hill Elementary School is situated in an ethnically diverse community, and the school population is comprised of students labeled by the district as Black (66%), Hispanic (24%), White (5%), and Asian (4%). Fern Hill Elementary School is located in one of the 20 largest school districts in the United States. Both the school and the district are

struggling to meet the standards in reading and writing that were established as part of a statewide school performance program.

Data Collection and Analysis

We used an array of materials and procedures to gather data to describe the communication and interpretation of reading assessment information. The data gathering instruments and procedures included interviews; classroom observations; videotapes of reading lessons; think-aloud protocols of the construction and interpretation of assessment information; examination of reading assessment materials and related documents at the classroom, school, and state levels; and rating tasks.

Participants

Our examination of how Karol and William communicate and understand reading assessment is taken from a larger study that included two teachers and four of their students. Karol has taught sixth grade for 4½ years at Fern Hill. Her training was originally in art education and her graduate courses in the master's program did not include reading or reading assessment courses. She recently completed a district-sponsored workshop in classroom-based assessment. Karol is a reflective teacher who told us that she is constantly searching for effective ways to help her students achieve their goals. She also told us she is interested

in reading assessment and regularly seeks the most effective methods for assessing students. She has high expectations that students should care about their work and their achievements. Karol told us that she had the goals of helping students create respect for themselves, their teacher, and others. Karol wants each of her students to achieve to their ability, and she treats each student within this frame of expectation that they should do their best.

Karol believes that the most valuable reading assessment occurs within the daily classroom routines of oral reading and teacher feedback. Question and answer sessions and listening to student discussions tells her most about how the students are doing. She believes that the daily contact and interaction that she has with her students tells her more about their progress than the district-wide and statewide assessments. Students in Karol's class regularly use work sheets and the worksheet grades represent both accountability to school district grading requirements and evidence that supports her classroom observations. Karol tells us that the grades "are important to me as far as having something concrete that I have to go back to ... and to give grades in a book." While her major concern for her students is reading comprehension, her major goals are to get the students "psyched up about reading," and for students to learn "a desire and a love of reading." Karol uses the basal reader series because, "I like it ... there's a nice theme builder ... and the selections in each unit are good stories." She also tries to give her students choices in their reading through the use of

additional literature.

Prior to the beginning of the school year we asked Karol to recommend students who might be willing to participate in the study. Karol enlisted the help of William, whom Karol considered to be a developing reader. William is a highly motivated African-American student who makes great effort to succeed in school and to please his teacher. William participates constantly: His hand is held high up in class when Karol is calling on students to read or to respond to questions. William is persistent even though he is sometimes "just way off base with his thoughts," according to Karol. While William is an enthusiastic and often motivated reader, he is not one of the stronger readers in his class. William considers reading to be "very important." When we asked him why, he told us:

> You have to understand the skill ... like SQR ... which is like ... survey, question, read, recite, and review ... and you read ... like I want to be a lawyer ... so I have to understand ... this ... what is it about .... what is the case about?

When we first asked William how he knew he was a good reader, he told us that he considers himself a good reader because Karol tells him so.

> When Karol says "You're a good reader ... very good"... but I think I can understand the skills more than I can read.

William occasionally used self-assessment, and he told us that he knew he needed to work to improve his reading, especially sounding out words.

Investigator: What do you need to work on?

William: Some of my words
Investigator: How do you know?
William: Because when I read I stutter ... and I can't pronounce the words right.

William believes he is doing "all right" in reading this year. He also tells us that Karol knows how he is doing in reading by paying attention to "the way I read ... by the way I put accent on the words ... and reading out loud." In addition to Karol's verbal feedback, William reports that he knows how well he is doing "because of my report card and the grades I get for my work." William also reports that his performance on activities and tasks helps him understand himself as a reader.

> Outlining ... comprehension skills ... story map ... and summary.... you have to know the story to do the work ... so to do it you know you're doing a good job.

William achieved the report card grade *B* in reading across the year (a consistent 3.0 GPA). He believes that the "*B*" grade means "you're not excellent, but you know what you're doing." William considers teacher-determined grades and Karol's oral feedback as the most important communication about his development as a reader. William demonstrates a habit of depending on reading assessment information given by Karol to gauge his ability as a reader, across the school year. He sometimes augments this with reflection on his own work.

Teacher Oral Feedback During Reading Lessons

Our first investigation of the communication and interpretation of reading assessment information

examined Karol's oral feedback to William during class reading lessons. We determined through interviews and observations that this was the most valued and frequent form of reading assessment information encountered in Karol's classroom (Afflerbach & Moni, 1995). We also determined that classroom discourse most frequently took the IRE (initiate-respond-evaluate) form (Cazden, 1978; Mehan, 1978). A coding scheme was developed which allowed us to determine the relationship between Karol's intended meaning and what William understood from Karol's feedback. The coding scheme included the categories of congruent, partially congruent, and not congruent.

We videotaped classroom reading lessons, and asked Karol to observe the videotape and describe the intended meaning of her feedback. William then viewed the videotape and told us his understanding of Karol's feedback. The following excerpt is from a lesson in which William worked with a basal reader worksheet. Students read statements and Karol calls upon individual students to decide whether statements are facts or opinions. In the excerpt, William does not understand the focus of the message (a particular word) or the related comment of Karol's message (to inform William that the answer is incorrect).

Example of incongruence in intended and interpreted meaning of teacher feedback to student response

Classroom interaction

K: We're talking about doctors perform amazing operations

W: I think that's ... opinion

K: Why?

W: Because they could have just like minor....

K: There's one word in there that really makes it an opinion

Karol's intention

K: I didn't make a comment to him because he was off... I didn't say—"no that's wrong" ... I just went to giving them there's one word that's going to tell you that it's an opinion ... he didn't get the word ... I didn't want to tell that in front of the whole class ... I just wanted to to give him another hint

William's interpretation

I: How did you do there in answering the question?

W: Good because she said.... I don't really know if she meant the sentence I said ... but I think I did a good job.

(BI2/8:23–9:00)

William's inability to construct meaning that was congruent with Karol's intended message was noted in nearly half the feedback sequences we analyzed in this study; although, William was sometimes able to construct congruent and detailed meanings from seemingly simple teacher feedback, such as "OK," or the repetition of a student's response. His ability to assign appropriate meanings to this feedback appeared to be influenced by his familiarity with the classroom context, what he chose to attend to within the context, and the perceived roles and purposes of reading assessment.

Researchers have demonstrated that the IRE pattern limits the nature of classroom discourse (Mehan,

1978), but the familiarity of the pattern may have helped William understand the assessment messages sent by Karol. In this case, we believe the predictable nature of spoken discourse in Karol's classroom sometimes serves to support William's understanding of teacher feedback: William's experiences in Karol's classroom familiarize him with both the nature and purpose of teacher talk. The results indicate the importance of familiarity with the culture and language of the classroom as a means of helping students understand the evaluation that is communicated by a teacher. Karol did not report teaching students how to construct congruent meanings from her evaluative feedback, nor did the students report receiving such training. Yet, William did understand Karol's intended message in over half the evaluative sequences that we analyzed. While we make no endorsement of the IRE pattern, we note that it was familiar to students and that it appeared to facilitate their understanding of teacher feedback. In contrast, Karol and her students might discuss the nature of classroom discourse (helping some students become metacognitive about the discourse), and this could contribute to increased understanding of the subtleties of the discourse, and their intent.

Based on our findings, we have several recommendations that might help teachers help their students make the most of oral feedback during reading lessons. Classroom discussions of the meaning and purpose of feedback might help students best understand and use feedback that is offered by teachers during the daily reading lesson. Consistency in classroom discussion

format can help students develop familiarity with the purpose and meaning of their teacher's feedback. The use of classroom charts and reminders that help students query the nature of the feedback they get from the teacher could prove valuable here. For example, charts to list, give examples of, and remind students of the types of teacher feedback and their meanings. Posters could also serve to remind students to pay close attention to teacher feedback and to seek clarification if it is not understood. Similarly, this might be accomplished through regular discussions with students about the purposes of teacher feedback, the important information to attend to in such information. Where the teacher and students are attempting to establish nontraditional discussion patterns, clarifying the purpose of feedback from teacher and peers may be achieved with detailed guidelines for giving and understanding oral feedback.

We believe it is of particular importance that teachers consider the implications that changing and nontraditional discussion patterns and formats have for student understanding of assessment feedback. For example, we know little about how students understand the evaluative feedback of peers. If there is movement in a classroom or school to replace or augment teacher-dominated reading lessons and the IRE discourse pattern with peer discussions, it is crucial that we help students become adept at communicating and interpreting the reading feedback they exchange with their classmates. In summary, we believe that when students have clear expectations for the nature and

meaning of teachers' oral feedback, they will be best situated to understand and make use of it. We found that the predictability of the classroom discourse appeared to make teacher feedback comprehensible.

The Report Card

The report card is an important means of communicating reading assessment information in Karol's classroom. Early in this study, the assistant principal Barbara reported her specific concerns about misinterpretations of reading assessment information contained in report cards. She reported that experiences in her role as vice principal and testing coordinator heightened her concerns about how students and parents understood the report card.

> The report card is as important to the student as to the parent, but the way it's [the report card] set up is sometimes ... the wording is misleading ... we'll have places for the grade ... the letter ... and then it'll say "Writing not legible" and they won't understand why they're [the boxes] checked or not checked or left blank, and whether or not there is something in the comments section.

On a Likert-scale task, William rated report card grades as "very important" reading assessment information that was "very easy" for him to understand. William also indicated that he believed that reading report card grades were very important to his parents, and to Karol. To understand how Karol constructed report

cards for her students, we asked her to think-aloud while writing report cards (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1993). Karol provided the following think-aloud account of how she arrived at William's reading grade:

> William really participates a lot ... much more than [student] does ... and he's not always on target ... he's more often ... especially on comprehension questions ... I don't think he really knows what he's reading all the time ... he really needs work on slowing down and not being so concerned with the final grade as to really reread things a couple of times through so that he understands what he's reading ... I didn't feel that he should get an A just because of his participation ... because most of his grades are *C*s and *B*s ... so that's how I came up with his grade ... *C*, *B*, *B*, *C*+, *B*, *C*+ ... turned in every single assignment ... he didn't give me a March book report ... and had I seen that last night or yesterday ... I really give them to the last possible ... the end of the grading period was last Wednesday ... but they were still turning in work Monday and Tuesday ... that's why I'm writing their report cards because I try to get everything graded ... I try to give them every opportunity to get work in ... he's still averaged out to a 2.54 GPA, but I really pushed those book reports; and I tell them if they don't turn in their book reports, I bring them down a grade ... and I didn't in his case....

William received a *B* for all three areas of reading (Reads with understanding, Uses word attack skills,

Shows wide interest in reading) and Karol recorded the following in the small written comments section:

> William's work habits and consistent participation continue to be his strong points. I'm very happy to see the improvement in Language and Social Studies. He continues to shine in Math. I'm very disappointed in behavior and hope it improves in the 4th quarter. GPA 2.54.

William provided the following interpretation of the grades and comments that he received from Karol:

I: Tell me what your report card means to you.
W: That I'm above average....
I: Can you tell me what above average means?
W: It means that you're not excellent ... you're ... you know what you are doing.
I: What does your grade tell you?
W: I know what I'm doing.
I: Where do you think this grade comes from?
W: From my book reports and my work sheets and the other work that we do in reading ... and the way I pronounce words ... and when I do my writing prompt ... and test scores from reading on the computer.

In the above excerpt, William is able to describe some of the sources of his grade in detail, including book reports, worksheets, test scores, writing on the computer, and his pronunciation of words. He also uses the report card grading key to literally interpret his grade of *B*. It tells him his work is "above average" and he does not reflect on his performance to provide details of this grade. He reports that the report card

grades tell him that "I know what I'm doing." The report card appears to fulfill one of Karol's goals (to affirm William's contributions and regular participation), but there is a lack of communication of the concern about William's development that is present in Karol's think-aloud account.

Geared to Karol's goals, the report card served as affirmation and motivator for William. He interpreted the letter grades as representing general levels of achievement. William was somewhat able to deconstruct his reading report card grades when prompted, but he exhibited only a general knowledge of the nature of information that Karol used in the report card grade construction task.

Based on our examination of how Karol constructed and communicated reading assessment information in the report card, and how William interpreted this information, we have several observations and recommendations. First, it is imperative that the report card is useful to teachers, students, and parents. This usefulness revolves around the nature of the information contained in the report card and how well it can be interpreted by readers of the report card. Usefulness of report card information appears related to teachers' and students' familiarity with structure and function of the report card. Karol did not know when the report card was created, nor did she know who created it. Furthermore, the report card did not appear to be aligned with Karol's curricular goals.

We recommend that school districts, supervisors, teachers, parents, and students be considered as

contributors to the report card development process. Through the consideration of the different audiences and their potential contributions, the greatest use of the report card may be realized. We also recommend that there be initial and periodic checks to determine how well the report card and the reading curriculum are aligned. Many report cards represent a behavioristic and decontextualized view of reading development, and this may not be an appropriate format for reporting progress in a reading program that embodies constructivist and literature- centered approaches to reading instruction. Our findings indicate that time should be alloted for teachers to explain reading report cards to students. During such time, teachers may clarify for students how a grade was determined and what student performances contributed to a high or low grade. We note that to the degree that a report card requires teacher narratives of student learning, there may be less need for teacher/student meetings to interpret report cards. We note also that either approach to the communication and interpretation of reading assessment contained in the report card will be enhanced when sufficient time is provided in the school schedule to construct and explain grades.

District-Wide Criterion Referenced Tests

William understood the high stakes nature of the criterion-referenced tests (CRT). He also was familiar with the practice of practicing to take the test. He had a hazy notion of the connection of the district test to the

statewide performance assessment, and he knew that a report of his performance on the CRT (which consumed considerable school resources and time) was delayed: no score was reported back to his teacher for the entire year. The actual CRT administration lasts for 1 week in early May. The spring testing provides the measures of student reading that are used by the county. Students at Fern Hill also take a practice CRT in January to help prepare for the spring testing. This orientation took place over the course of 1 week for 1½ hr per day (7½ hr total). Students took the test again in May, again for 1 week.

Despite the considerable time and effort invested in practicing for, administering, and taking the test, a district supervisor reported that information about individual students was not reported back to teachers or students by the end of the school year.

> Last year, there was the spring administration of the CRT ... and that information would not come back to the teacher with which the students took the test.

Although there was increased effort to reduce the time between administering the test and reporting back of scores, the supervisor noted that this was possible only with the multiple choice items. The performance assessment items were not machine-scoreable, and the reporting time for these was considerable.

> We hope to have a very quick turn-around on the multiple choice ... within 3 to 4 weeks ... and the performance items ... the logistics of scoring them become a big concern ... the audience

would be teachers, building administrators, and parents because parents would get back individual information on how well their children did.

William rated the assessment information yielded by the CRT as very important, and he believed that the information from the CRT "helps a lot" in him becoming a better reader. He did not tell us why or how the test did this. William rated the CRT as easy to understand and as very important to his parents and his teacher. William also reported that the CRT required "a lot of time" for the class to take and complete. When asked about the CRT, William gave the following answers

I: Do you know the name of the test you're taking?
W: The CRT.
I: Do you know who made the test?
W: No.
I: Do you know what the test is for?
W: No.
I: Do you know if you'll find out how you did on the test?
W: Well, I did find out in third grade.
I: When do you think that will be?
W: I'm not sure that I'll ever know.
I: What do you think the test scores will be used for?
W: Like, what kind of reading group I'm in at ... not reading group but what kind of reading skills I'll get next year.
I: Is this test important for you?
W: Yeah.
I: Why?
W: Like it's something where you find out next year ...

what kind of reading you'll be in ... and I think nobody would want to be below average.

Large-scale tests like the CRT presented a daunting set of challenges to the teachers and students at Fern Hill Elementary School. Developed outside of school, they were not accompanied by clear or helpful explanations of the purpose or uses of the test. It was difficult for teachers to communicate to students information related to different aspects of the tests. The teachers were also caught in a *Catch-22* situation. The criterion-referenced test demanded considerable time for test preparation and administration. Because the teachers and students were sometimes uninformed partners in the criterionreferenced enterprise, teachers had to decide if they would take even more time from their already constrained professional schedules to find out about the test, and to educate their students about the nature and purpose of the tests.

Based on Karol's and William's experiences with the district-wide criterion referenced test, we have several recommendations related to the development and use of large-scale reading assessments. First, efforts must be made to help teachers and students understand the purpose of the assessment and the uses of the assessment information. We found that Karol assumed a "middleperson" role in terms of the CRT. She understood some of the details of CRT purpose and use, but there was much that was not clear. To more fully understand the details of the CRT, Karol would have to invest further time to determine sources of information. Where Karol might find this time is not clear: the CRT

preparation and administration already demanded a considerable amount of the school year. Clearly, efforts to develop new large-scale assessments must be matched by efforts to clearly describe the ways and means of the assessment.

William's experience with the CRT also brings us to several recommendations. First, students need to know why they are being assessed and what the assessment information will be used for. Lack of clarity in these issues may send students a subtle (or not so subtle) message that reading assessment is not their concern. Over time, this may create an expectation or belief among students that reading assessment is not something they do or need to do. Second, we believe students will benefit from the feedback and closure that can be provided by the results of large-scale assessment. William did not receive any information about his performance on an assessment that demanded over 2 weeks of reading class time.

Conclusions

In summary, the administrators, teachers, and students at Fern Hill Elementary School use a reading assessment system that has different components that serve different purposes. Teachers and students ascribe different meanings and purposes to these assessments, and the assessment materials are used differently as determined by perceived roles and contexts. What lessons did we learn from our collaboration with Karol and William at Fern Hill Elementary School?

We learned that successful communication of reading assessment information is never guaranteed, and that careful work must be done to create a context in which students understand what is intended. Students and teachers should discuss reading assessment materials, procedures, and purposes as conducted in the classroom on a daily basis. This will familiarize them with the intent of assessment information, and may help them determine when communication is not working well. For reading assessment that is tied to initiatives and procedures developed outside the classroom (such as report cards and district or state tests), our advice is that teachers who have the opportunity to serve on assessment development teams should seriously consider the contributions they might make to an effective and effectively communicated assessment program. School districts that are developing assessments should take seriously the charge of developing a means of communicating information about the nature, means, and purposes of assessment as they are developing the assessment itself. Too often, there is little or no work done in this critical area.

Finally, we believe it is critical to consider a priori the effects, uses, and misuses of any assessment materials and procedures that are considered for implementation in classrooms. The influences on teachers and students, the time it takes from the school day, and the time taken from other things which actually might contribute to literacy all demand that reading assessment be examined so that the people who receive reading assessment information construct understandings that were intended by the senders.

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